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## FIVE AXIOMS OF COMPOSITION TEACHING

WITH your permission I will endeavor to formulate, and briefly to illustrate certain principles, or maxims, of English teaching which seem to me absolutely fundamental to this most important part of the work of education. When I name them, as in my title, *axioms* of English teaching, you understand me, of course, not to use the word *axiom* in its more modern, technical sense, as it is employed in logic and geometry, where it means a self-evident proposition, but in its primitive, literary meaning; just as John Harris, in his *Great Teacher*, applied it to the *Golden Rule*. By no means would I arrogate to my aphorisms the quality of instantaneous and final refusal to be questioned. I have worked them out empirically, and also dialectically; having taught the subject a great deal, and reasoned much with other teachers of it. Nor do I hope by any means to have made always precisely the right allowance for my personal equation. Yet I call my maxims axioms because it seems to me they are essential starting points in building up a wise course of procedure to constitute a methodic in English pedagogy; and that I did not say maxims, or principles, or rules, was because I wanted a title that should seem at the very outset to make all possible claim of absolute cogency.

I. The faculty of speech, in both child and youth, resides in that part of the spiritual nature, below consciousness and volition, which is to be reached, for cultural purposes, only through the affections and the taste.

The child gets his language solely by imbibing it from his environment; if there is no audible speech in his environment he imbibes no speech. But he does not imbibe every word he hears; his curiosity does not extend to everything he comes in contact with. Only the things that appeal to him, that interest and please him, or perhaps terrify him, sink into his nature.

Nothing else can possibly get into his soul. One of the most astonishing facts about human life is the power we all have to shed the rain of wisdom, which falls upon us and we do not take it in. The youth protects himself against that overplus of systematic knowledge which we thrust upon his attention by simply remaining impervious to it. We call him dull; but nature knows what she is doing.

The child learns none of the English that fills the air about him except just those strains of it to which his nature responds. The youthful nature responds when its wonder is aroused; its imagination kindled; its constructive, its benevolent, altruistic instincts called into play; its reverence moved. The child imbibes, absorbs, imitates, from his environment, a few things, and passes by many things as not being for him, not even noting the fact that these alien things exist. He is happy in his world, —a world which he is perpetually enlarging and refurnishing. The influx into this world he does not and cannot regulate by acts of his will. Nor can we, as parents and teachers, regulate it by acts of our will.

Only so far as it is given us to determine the child's environment can we exert any formative influence whatever on his speech; and in this environment, when we have determined it and enriched it with all thinkable good elements, he takes in nothing that does not catch his attention by virtue of its inherent power to impress, to interest, to please, his moral or æsthetic nature. Information he takes in with his intellect, and deposits in his memory; but this intellectual apprehension, this laying up in the chambers of remembrance, so far as it is a mere getting and storing, adds nothing to his speech. For that is not a lingual possession which serves merely to reproduce remembered things, and does not occur spontaneously to form the expression of original thought.

The emotions—as we are wont to figure the mind in our ordinary speech—lie deeper than the intellect; and while we can turn our minds to what we will for the purpose of study, or cool intellection, our feelings are subject to vicissitude and obey

occasions. We require a youth to set his mind at work, to learn his lessons; we hold him responsible for concentrating his attention. This is the scholastic discipline, and involves compulsion, insistence, duress. The emotions can be reached in no such way. If the wonder, the pity, the reverence, of the youth are to be roused to activity, all disciplinary arts must, of course, step aside, and the occasion of the emotion be simply brought within his ken, where his imagination may seize upon it and picture it to his spiritual eye. The one process we call instruction, a building up; the other is no process at all, but is the simple act of presentation. To tell a story well, to read a simple poem well, to show an impressive picture, to enforce a lesson of self-sacrifice,—these are simple pedagogic acts which not only need no elaboration, but even insist on being spared elaboration, as a procedure incongruous with their very nature.

The scholastic world is beginning to grow conscious of a dereliction in its tendencies. You must have noted how many educators have recently tried to enforce the importance of the æsthetic side of education, and have sought to show how the æsthetic nature may be reached through literature well interpreted. The conviction is generally held that the schools have become one-sided, over-intellectualized, given too much to restless instruction, organized and planned. The course of procedure called for by the needs of the emotional part of education cannot be schematized and tabulated, apportioned to terms and weeks. Hence the superintendents and the normal schools have, perhaps unconsciously, and by no means solely because they have arid conceptions of human life and human happiness, tended to restrict their activity to the things they could most clearly prescribe, and, I doubt not, to the things they were surest to be able to examine and mark. An experienced teacher told me of the time when there was a general movement towards doing away with the literary reading books in favor of reading books full of useful information. The experienced teacher I have referred to attributed to this abandonment of æsthetic reading in the schools the miserable decay of the art of express-

ive reading among our high school youth,—a decay which he had noted with regret, and had had the fullest opportunity for observing, having seen more of the high schools of Massachusetts than any other man. And I do not hesitate to go further, and to connect with the now almost universal inability of teachers, and I will say, of college preparatory teachers especially, to read English, the universal complaint that comes from the colleges of the feeble and slovenly English of their students.

The college preparatory schools are peculiarly restricted to the intellectual side of education. Latin, Greek, and mathematics are entirely lacking in power to penetrate to the imagination. For you must remember that Latin and Greek are concerned, at least in the schools, solely with memorizing and slow construing, and that Homer and Virgil have not been made accessible, as literature, to boys entering college.

Moreover, English itself, coming into the preparatory schools, is usually subjected to the old dead-language conventions, and is taught as if it also were a thing recondite, abounding chiefly in mysteries of etymology and syntax,—a thing which only learned men can fathom,—to a boy a grinding task, which he is resolved he never will meddle with again, when once the days of school compulsion are over. So we find that just as a high school spends a year in reading three or four books of Virgil, so also it undertakes two books of *Paradise Lost*, as if Milton's language were dead and hard,—his poem as a whole beyond the reach of school.

I come back to my thesis, that the youth's English is to be reached only through the emotional nature. Not poetry analyzed, but poetry relished, enjoyed, repeated with gusto, declaimed with abandon, acted with energy, felt as a heat melting to hard natures, seen as picture with the eye of the imagination,—poetry received in the spirit in which it was offered by the artists who made it,—poetry thus welcomed, and nothing else, will penetrate to the deep strata of the soul where language dwells, make the mind plastic and receptive, impressible to words, responsive to thought, full of sympathy with the race

in its hopes and aspirations. Every cultivated Greek knew his Homer, every cultivated Roman his Virgil, every cultivated Italian knows his Dante, and every cultivated Anglo-Saxon knows his Shakespeare. The great poets are the conservators and teachers of the language. The great quarry of diction is our imaginative literature. Neglect this, and the native speech runs to waste. We have neglected it, and our native speech has run to waste.

II. The act of speech exists only as a medium, or means, of communication between one mind and another, and without the two correlates, speaker and hearer, both actually or in imagination present, there can be no speech. The writer speaks to his public of readers; in our most secret of diaries, in our jottings in our memorandum books, we speak to our future selves; the little girl, playing alone, receives a caller, and prettily enacts two parts, doubling her personality in imagination. Nobody writes or speaks without contemplating a reader or a hearer. You cannot conceive of articulate words as hurled forth into the desert air, where hearing shall not latch them, unless it be an act of acute mania. Imagine a prisoner condemned to write each day a composition of so many pages, this composition never to be read, but to go each night into the warden's wastebasket. Did this refinement of cruelty ever occur to any truculent prison official? But it occurs to you at once that if our prisoner is a politician and can reach a paper with his copy, and read himself in type in the morning, he is really no longer under restraint, but is virtually living in the tide of affairs and associating with his fellow men.

My parable of the prisoner forced to write with nothing to say and nobody to say it to, describes almost exactly the case of the schoolboy in the hands of his English teacher. Whereas in nature he who sits down to write or lifts up his voice to speak is moved by a desire to project his thought so that it may meet the receptive senses of an audience listening or a public reading; and if he has no thought to project, or is aware of no attentive ears or eyes ready to catch his projected words, he

refuses to wet his pen or talk into the empty air; in the school, on the other hand, the English teacher, who does not mean to be cruel, begins by prescribing composition; not because there is something that needs to be said, but because an act of saying must be performed, in order that it may be judged and marked for its virtue as speech; and not because there is an expectant or willing public to be instructed or entertained,—for there is no such public,—but that a hurried, much oppressed teacher may keep his class records and issue his report.

The indispensable conditions of an act of expression are, first, a mind possessing a communicable thought, and, secondly, a mind eager to receive that thought and opening to it its avenues of intelligence. The school usually provides neither of these conditions: it should provide both. The teacher considers how often he shall require compositions to be written; he prescribes their length; he talks much about paragraphing, punctuation, the use of capitals, correct spelling. That is, he begins with the act of expression; as if expression could begin with itself, and had power to order up thoughts to serve as dummies on which to show the varied garments of speech; and as if expression—that is the very act of speech—had power to conjure up the simulacrum of a listening audience to cheer the speaker and make expression worth while.

The composition teaching in our schools is impotent to the extent to which it fails to provide the two prime conditions of composition,—a well-furnished mind conscious of having something to say, and a listening or reading public to which this something may be said with the hope of giving pleasure. And these conditions may be attained, provided we seriously mean to have them and can bring ourselves to the point of cutting loose from certain old schoolmasterly prepossessions. And this consideration brings me to my third axiom, which I herewith propound.

III. A group of youth consists of individuals who are not alike, and who cannot possibly all love or like or care for the same things. Purely objective things of course remain ever the

same. If the business is to conjugate a Greek verb, there is only one way to do it,—all the class must do precisely the same thing. But if a magnificent passage of the *Iliad* is to be translated, tastes come into play, and pupils show their various culture. In matters intellectual pupils advance in line, or according to their alertness in observing, judging, reasoning. In matters of taste, in matters wherein the heart is enlisted, pupils reveal their differences, and will not, cannot, move all together.

Now, as composition, to be real and not merely spectral, must issue from a mind conscious of possessing something that other minds do not possess, and with which, accordingly, the possessing mind may interest and instruct the other minds by communicating it, it follows that the English teacher must to a certain extent isolate his pupils in composition, and give to each his own subject of thought and research, showing the possibilities of this or that theme, and encouraging each pupil to explore this or that field, so as to find something worth telling, to which the rest shall have to listen. All this is easily possible. If you are skeptical about it, so much the worse for you: old teachers as you are, you do not know the irresistible push of youth; or, at any rate, you do not know the patience, the zeal, the pride in good work, the *laudum immensa cupido*, of high school girls.

A class in composition should be as large as possible, because it is to serve as audience. Remember that, of a composition enterprise, the end and aim is publication. The listening audience was contemplated from the outset. The writer must not be cheated of his reward, the plaudits of his mates. The anticipation of this public appearance on the platform has spurred him on to do his best, to cull his English, to find piquant things in books, in nature, in history, that shall rivet attention, and, for his ten minutes, make him monarch of the swelling scene. Every good composition—good because careful in its language and because it sets forth an original thought—must have the reward of publication in some form. It may be printed in the school paper; it may be read from the platform; it may be passed round the class for inspection, and lent to some pupil of



dull ambition, who needs a stimulus, to take home for thoughtful examination.

Thoroughly pernicious is the notion that pupils must be made to compose something every day, for the sake of practice in composing. If you undertake this daily composition enterprise you must rake together all the pettinesses of current life for your material; you must expect, at best, a wish-wash of trivialities; the stuff is too abundant to be read; it is too thin to interest anybody, even if it could be read. You do ill to set up the ideal of fluency as the goal of your composition teaching. The market is glutted with fluency, with highly colored descriptions of things not worth describing. A man may easily devote the entire leisure of his eyes and his mind to the reading of matter all composed and printed within the twenty-four hours. What a difference between such a man and one who is wont to commune with his Dante, his Homer, his Shakespeare! Let us be thankful that the national head of our educational system, the man who wrote that classic of pedagogy, the *Report of the Fifteen*, is our profoundest Dante scholar, a man who has abundantly exhorted us to study the poets in order to preserve the sweetness and sanity of our minds, a man whom, if you call my doctrine sentimental, you must include under the same condemnation. And though I am making an episode, and wandering a little from my proper theme, I will not forego the opportunity to say that our other eminent Dantean, Eliot Norton, has given us in his *Heart of Oak* books his doctrine of a child's reading, and invites young minds to a wholesome feast of the imagination. But I pass to my next axiom:

IV. The correct use of the mother tongue is not a specialty of certain professionals, but belongs as an essential element to the manners of every cultivated man and woman. This you allow at once to be axiomatic; you will not dispute its truth, and I am not going to enlarge upon it. But I am going to insist upon what seems to me the necessary correlative of it, and submit that the *teaching* of the correct use of the mother tongue should not be assigned to a special teacher. If the

teachers of a school are gentlemen and ladies of culture, they know good English from bad, are competent to correct errors, and to appreciate the good qualities of writing. A single teacher laboring over the correction of great masses of composition effects nothing. The general tone of a school may be corrupting to the English of its pupils in spite of the most indefatigable work in the way of correction by a specialist.

If a pupil is to learn good English at school, he must have more than a good teacher; he must breathe in the school a good moral atmosphere. The English learned at school is a part of the morals learned at school; it is a part of the *esprit de corps*, a part of the social standing of its teachers and pupils, a part of the desire to please teachers with deferential deportment, a part of the respect shown by the sexes to each other, a part of the reserve which keeps individuals somewhat apart in recognition of each other's self-respect. In short, a school teaches its English by its total moral and æsthetic impressiveness. The teacher of English may contribute to this totality of influence; I think, indeed, his opportunity for so doing, if he teaches the literature, is peculiarly favorable. But every teacher counts for his quantum, and the principal counts for as much as all the rest; the constituency counts for very much; old traditions are a factor whose value cannot be estimated. We form a conception of a school as good because of some intangible impressions prevailing in the community, passed on as traditions, maintained in families by boys and girls who catch the school spirit and come home full of youthful gush, which fond parents know how to interpret. Then, of course, the school at its best is but one influence of many that shape the language opportunity of the youth. The youth who lives in a home with a library is separated, lingually, by a measureless chasm, from the youth who lives without books. But of this interesting subject, and its implications in school ministration, it is not my purpose now to speak.

What I must say here is that the special teacher of composition should be abolished. He does no good, and he stands in the way. The reading of a certain limited amount of juvenile

writing for purposes of correction is a pleasing task, leading to personal relations, to an appreciation of individual difficulties, to a possible giving of wise counsel. But the reading of juvenile writing in great quantities is inconsistent with mental and physical health. All the teachers of a school should share equally this task of supervising the English writing. I do not see how any teacher, man or woman, can have the effrontery to claim to know good English better than the rest; and I do not see how any teacher can submit to the drudgery of having several times his share of this work thrust upon him.

The true function of the English teacher should be to teach English literature and, historically, the English language. The English teacher should be eminently well read in the old writers, and should be competent to teach Anglo-Saxon. This is the goal to which we are tending. The correction of pupils' compositions no more concerns the English teacher than it does the teachers of history, science, Latin, Greek, and mathematics, for whom pupils write and speak English as much as they do for the teacher of literature and old English.

Every teacher should be a teacher of composition. The pupils of a school should be divided among all the teachers, for composition purposes, and the principal should have his portion. The quota of pupils per teacher in our large schools is from thirty to forty. With no more pupils in composition than this, any teacher can invent material in abundance, follow up the process of search, supervise the writing, and finally do the requisite correcting, not only without overwork, but even with perpetual elation of spirits.

And this consideration brings me to the last of the five axioms I am going to trouble you with today.

V. The work of composition, to have any success whatever, absolutely must be done by the pupil with pleasure; and the supervision and correction of composition must be done by the teacher with alacrity and curiosity. You will say I am only describing the spirit in which all school work should be done. Perhaps you are such inveterate routinists that you pooh-pooh

all such moralizing as moonshine, and plan to work in dead inertia, assuming that pupils must, as a matter of course, be regarded as unwilling to be taught, and that common sense in pedagogy leaves to harmless theorists all this dallying with interest, with the emotions, with the absurd idea that pupils can ever be brought to the point of loving their school. To be sure, when I say that composition can be taught only to willing learners, I utter a truism of education; and truisms are often so very true that they are not true at all in actual circumstances; and you think, perhaps, I have gone too far, and when I suggest that pupils must love to write and teachers must love to read and correct, you say I come from Utopia, for the like of this was never heard of on this planet. Well, I have known pupils to wait weeks, and even months, for a teacher to read a composition. The English teacher who corrects pupils' work in that way is in the glacial epoch of his teaching. And I have seen pupils who would brook no delay; they wrote to have their matter read, and read it must be; their fate they must know; they have rummaged and delved for their material; they are flushed and anxious about it; what praise or blame is it going to receive. A pupil whose composition is not good enough for some kind of publication should feel disappointed and plead for the privilege of rewriting. And this is by no means an unattainable ideal.

Once reduce the mere quantity of composition reading that any one teacher has to do to fair and reasonable limits, and we may have all good things. Teachers, I believe, prefer natural conditions,—youth effervescing in youthful ways, eager to please devoted, interested instructors; fellow teachers laboring to the same end, all concerned to stimulate those mental activities which eventuate in expression; all curious to see how youthful awkwardness rapidly gives way to ease and mastery; all bent to win for the school a name for successful teaching of English. The misery is when there is no school official to believe in these possibilities, but only a looker on to see to it that no one ventures upon an innovation.

SAMUEL THURBER

BOSTON, MASS.